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THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL HEALTH IN MINISTRY

Spiritual health is a vital dimension of pastoral ministry. Pastors need to have a real and growing relationship with Jesus that infuses their ministry. Paul was so concerned about maintaining spiritual health to the end of his ministry that he wrote:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

This biblical truth was borne out in a 2012 study of over 1000 Australian religious workers. This study by the University of Western Sydney looked at the key organisational, personality, and spiritual factors that influence well-being in pastoral ministry. Their concern was that pastors work in stressful environments and so they wanted to deduce the key factors in a religious worker's ability to cope with the stress and engage well with work (ministry) over an extended period.

The study found that the key to well-being at work (positive engagement in ministry) was not reducing demands, but building resources, particularly spiritual resources. This not only reduced the chance of burnout, but motivated the pastor to engage more productively in his/her work.

One of the most significant aspects of this research followed Christian workers over 18 months to see what caused positive engagement in work. The study resulted in three significant and somewhat unexpected findings.

1. It was only a high level of spiritual resources that produced increased levels of work engagement nine months later. In other words, spiritual health had more impact on ministry involvement than anything else.
2. A growing engagement in ministry developed greater job resources and greater satisfaction with the job.
3. This greater engagement in ministry and development of resources, led to lower spiritual resources nine months later.

So the study showed that spiritual health was vital to satisfaction and effectiveness in ministry. In fact, it was the most important ingredient. However, satisfaction and involvement in ministry eventually decreased spiritual health.

Here is a quote from the "Well-Being in Ministry Results Overview" (2012, 4):

There does appear to be a potential dark side to work engagement to which Christian workers are vulnerable. High levels of engagement and motivation in ministry encourages a concentration not only on work tasks, but also on job resources that one recognises as

helpful for reducing demands and/or accomplishing work tasks. However, strong motivation for work tasks and the corresponding focus on job resources can come at the expense of failing to cultivate spiritual resources, which may seem more distant from the meeting of numerous urgent work demands. Paradoxically, the motivation and job related focus of high work engagement appears to squeeze out and consume the very spiritual resources that bring it to life in the first place.

So this study by an Australian university illustrates two key lessons about spiritual health that it seems Paul was tackling personally in 1 Cor. 9:24-27.

1. Our spiritual health is the most important contributor to our satisfaction and effectiveness in ministry. Paul understood that his relationship with God needed to be made his highest priority. A healthy and growing relationship with God is more important than anything else for positive and effective ministry.
2. Spiritual health is not a given just because we are engaging in successful ministry. In fact, the opposite is true. Ministry inevitably drains spiritual health. So, as Paul indicates, spiritual health is something that has to be fought for. There is no place to rest on ministry success. Our very achievements will be contributing to our spiritual diminishment. Spiritual health requires consistent and intentional effort.

It is important for all Christian leaders to focus on issues of spiritual health. This is not just for your own personal satisfaction (although there is nothing more satisfying than sharing the heart of Jesus), but is also for the sake of the power and effectiveness of your ministry, and for your ongoing involvement in this ministry.